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Covert War in Central America Troubles a Hill GOP Overseer

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During the summer of 1975, David F. Durenberger, an executive for a St. Paul, Minn., company that did considerable business selling paints and plastics in Central America, received a letter from his 12-year-old son, who was spending part of the summer in El Salvador.

"He talked about the disparity between rich and poor, about a 250-pound cop with a machine gun," Durenberger recalled. "It's so obvious when you go through those countries. You'll see something, their version of a modern shopping center, and go off the edge of the parking lot and there's a ravine and people living on the side of a hill with no running water."

Durenberger, a Republican from Minnesota who was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1978 to complete the unexpired term of Democrat Hubert H. Humphrey, said his business experience in Central America during the 1970s made him a strong supporter of long-range economic aid as a solution to that region's turmoil.

But as a member of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Durenberger has had to grapple for more than two years with troubling short-term proposals: the Reagan administration's covert war against the leftist Sandinista government of Nicaragua.

The recent exposure of the CIA's direct involvement in the mining of Nicaraguan harbors has undercut congressional support for funding the secret war and raised new questions about the performance of the two congressional intelligence committees that were established to oversee the activities of the CIA.

Thus Durenberger finds himself being questioned about a secret war that isn't secret anymore. It is clear from a series of recent interviews that the moderate Republican has become increasingly frustrated by the administration's policy in Central America.

After opposing it earlier, he voted for funding the covert war for the first time last fall, but is trying to get Congress involved more directly in determining the policy. He mentions the "discomfort" he feels when Republican colleagues challenge his patriotism and that of others who ask questions about administration proposals.

Durenberger said President Reagan believes he can easily rally public support for his Central-American policies.

"He says, 'All I've got to do is go on television. I don't worry about the American public, because I know if I go on television and tell them, like I did on Grenada, remember how I went and turned the whole thing around?' So if push comes to shove in Central America he'll just go on television with his charts and pictures and have them eating out of his hand."

Dealing with the moral and pragmatic questions of attempting to oversee a secret war is more difficult from Durenberger's perspective. "When you put your objectives in the hands of someone else with a very different set of objectives and then hand him a rifle, you're just asking for it," he said.

Durenberger criticized U.N. Ambassador Jeane J. Kirkpatrick's statements that the United States should not unilaterally abide by international law while rivals flaunt it. "That's an eye for an eye. That's the Israeli way, the Libyan way, the Iranian way . . . The ends justify the means. That's a whole philosophy that America has disowned throughout our history," he said.

He doesn't feel, though, that the administration is using the same "eye-for-an-eye" rationale in the covert war against Nicaragua.

"They are interdicting, trying to hold the land. Some people are dying. That can be justified as a civil war that would have happened anyway. And theoretically we aren't doing it just to kill people. We are doing it for a political objective, which is to get the Sandinistas to agree to the original goals of their revolution."

Durenberger said he went to the Senate with a background that included training as an Army counterintelligence specialist in the 1950s and training at a Catholic college "totally dedicated to fighting world communism."

But he opposed funding for the covert war at first because he felt that the people of Nicaragua would turn on the Sandinistas without outside help. "I felt the only thing that would keep the people from turning on them was for us to appear to be turning on the revolution and that is, in effect, what happened with the covert action."

He also acknowledges that a review of his record on Central America "looks like I've been on all sides of this thing."

As a newcomer to the Senate in 1979, he was one of the few Republicans to support President Carter's plan to send aid to Nicaragua. And though he opposed the covert funding in the Intelligence Committee's secret votes in the spring of 1982, he supported President Reagan's policies during his own reelection campaign that fall.

A year ago, he said, he was so concerned by the vague objectives of the covert operations that he went to see William P. Clark, then Reagan's national security affairs adviser, and warned the administration that he would propose ending the secret aid. He did so. But when the administration came up with a new "finding" to justify the program last September, Durenberger voted in favor of it for the first time.

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He changed his mind, he said, because the program was already well under way. "So the question was really, can you manage it, now that the fat is in the fire. The adversity we are going to suffer in terms of strengthening the peoples' attitude against the *gringos* has already been suffered. We'd already been through the bad side. The question was, can you make anything good out of it and does it have a terminus? We pushed them off a very general 'finding' under which they could do just about anything and never have to prove they were successful."

Durenberger said he visited Costa Rica before agreeing to support the revised covert aid plan and talked with government and church leaders, as well as with Alfonso Robelo, one of the rebel leaders he knew from his days as a businessman in the region.

"I came back with a feeling we couldn't abandon an effort to make the Sandinistas adhere to the original revolution. Everyone supported it and didn't want to replace it with a dictatorship. They said, 'Whatever you're doing, you've got to keep it up.' "

With the bipartisan Kissinger commission working on long-range solutions, he said, "I figured we were on the right track as long as we kept control. And the way to keep control was to approve half as much money as they actually wanted and require them to come back in before they got any more money."

In retrospect, Durenberger said, the Intelligence Committee should have figured the CIA was directly supervising the mining of Nicaraguan harbors.

"All of our questions were always around, 'Are you sure you can control them?' It was, 'CIA, are you able to control this covert activity and all of its many parts, because we don't want it turned back on us. We don't want pictures in Managua of innocent civilians hanging by their thumbs from trees and contras [rebel forces] standing there laughing.' "

Durenberger recalls that most members of the Senate Intelligence Committee missed CIA Director William J. Casey's terse, one-sentence reference to mining Nicaraguan harbors at a secret March 8 meeting because they were too busy "jumping on" Casey and Secretary of State George P. Shultz, who earlier had tried to go to the Apropriations Committee for approval of the covert war funding without first getting approval from the Intelligence Committee. "It was literal chaos," Durenberger said. "It was a zoo."

If the committee had been better informed, Durenberger said he is sure members would have asked questions about the mining operation. "We'd have said, 'What ports? What's the traffic load there? What countries do they represent?' If they were only eastern European, we might have let her go."

The problem was not so much the CIA supervision of the mining, he said, but that "the indiscriminate use of mining gives people around the world the opportunity to say Ronald Reagan is crazy. And it gives the Sandinistas the opportunity to stiff us out even further."

He said that if the committee had been asked for its judgment on the mining, "we could have netted out all that information and drawn a bottom line that said, 'If this word gets out or the first country [whose ship is hit] complains, you're doomed. So forget it. Forget it. Go on and do something else.' "

He said he still will support the covert aid package to keep the pressure on Nicaragua in hope that negotiations and long-term economic aid will solve the region's problems.

"It's a question of urgency," he said. "We have to elevate the realities down there from an East-West confrontation and fears of refugees and blind faith in the president. It is as urgent as the deficit. The country just is not aware there is a solution other than pull out, send the troops in, or screw around with covert actions."